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## ***The Role of Airpower in Humanitarian Operations***

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Relief organizations continue to provide humanitarian aid in sub-Saharan Africa, often with tough problems arising from inhospitable environment, insecurity, and political- or ethnic-generated conflicts. Airpower, with its characteristics of speed, range, and flexibility could alleviate these problems and hence enable relief agencies to perform their duties with fewer obstacles. To be effective, however, those concerned with airpower must understand the functions and problems affecting relief organizations, for only then can a sound strategy be developed that can help enhance efficiency in humanitarian relief operations.

This article discusses the role of airpower in humanitarian operations--particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, humanitarian organizations, successes and setbacks--and Kenya's participation in relief activities. It will also submit suggestions that could help enhance efficiency of airpower in humanitarian operations in the region.

### **Environmental Factors**

Sub-Saharan Africa covers an area of more than 23 million square kilometers composed of rugged terrain, harsh climatical conditions, unreliable rainfall patterns, and limited sources of clean water. Of the rivers flowing in the region, only a few are permanent while most are seasonal. About 55 percent of Africa's population is found in sub-Saharan Africa. More than 75 percent is in the rural areas. Nearly all the people living in the rural area, live in villages, and practice subsistence farming. Communities usually group themselves according to their ethnicity.

Ethnic diversity also implies diverse cultures. Just as Western civilizations have their own diverse cultures, so do the countries in the sub-Saharan Africa where cultural diversity is even more pronounced. The ethnic differences and therefore cultural diversity in some countries like Rwanda have been exploited to further drive the people of a particular country away from each other. Cultural differences have also been converted into a source of strength and pride in a rich cultural heritage as exemplified in Kenya by the mix of cultural dances at important national celebrations. Indeed, national celebrations are deemed incomplete without our proved cultural dancers, and every ethnic community strives to display its unique culture to the wider Kenyan population. When it comes to cuisine, one must also be careful lest you provoke those you intended to feed. For example, in a Muslim community, it is taboo to be associated with pig, leather included. It is offensive to feed a Maasai on a diet of fish, nutritional benefits notwithstanding. These are but a few examples of cultural taboos. While a dog is considered man's best companion in some societies, it is a delicacy in others on the same planet. Suffice it to say that a community must be respected for its cultural values, including eating.

Superstition is another factor for consideration in the region. Most communities place a taboo on the counting of their family members for reasons bordering on superstition. Census figures therefore hardly represent the true picture of the population. Probably because of poor statistics, surplus food aid has been delivered to some villages or communities at the expense of others.

Roads, railways, and telecommunications were developed by the colonial powers according to their economic and administrative objectives. Villages sprouted along the roads and railways lines because of

work and trade. These villages grew into towns and cities and obviously enjoyed rapid growth in education, medical services, communication, and commerce. Areas lying adjacent to the new urban centers also benefited from the changes taking place in the towns and cities. Tragically, those areas far from the seat of government and the influences of the new culture remained undeveloped.

Airports were later constructed near the cities or towns that were of interest to the colonial powers; hence they were of no use to the rural community. However, like the road and rail networks in sub-Saharan Africa, the aviation industry is also beset with phenomenal problems. In some countries, airfields and airstrips are of no use for staging or mounting humanitarian air campaigns as distances are too great from the aid target groups. Besides, it is not always possible to flip through international aviation manuals to extract the data about the required airstrip, since more often than not, the information is either outdated or nonexistent. Some airstrips that appear on topographical maps and other charts may be long overgrown with shrubs and trees. What may be shown as a navigational aid may have been out of operation for a long time. This is not because host countries do not appreciate the importance of such facilities but because of a horde of competing needs. Many airstrips can only accommodate small aircraft and do not have ground support facilities, fuel, or fire services.

Banditry in sub-Saharan Africa cannot be overlooked. Because of historical and cultural reasons that are related to colonialism or the patterns of migrations, similar ethnic communities traverse country boundaries at will. In sub-Saharan Africa, similar tribes or nationalities (as commonly referred to in the West) ended up in different countries in the scramble and subsequent partitioning of Africa by the Berlin conference. The carving out of boundaries was influenced by the interests of the colonizing powers represented in the conference and not by the interests of the communities affected. Nearly all the conflicts in Africa and even elsewhere have their causes deep-rooted in this historical reality. The ongoing ethnic strife in Somalia, Rwanda and Burundi, Zaire, the Western Sahara and, further afield, in the former Yugoslavia are living testimonies. Let me now turn to the performance of the humanitarian relief organizations in sub-Saharan Africa.

### **Humanitarian Organizations: Successes and Setbacks**

Humanitarian relief agencies in sub-Saharan Africa have been involved in saving lives from natural calamities like drought, and in providing shelter, medical care, clothing, and fuel as witnessed in the flood relief in Kenya in 1961 and in the famine relief in Ethiopia and many countries in the region in 1984. In addition to natural calamities, humanitarian organizations continue to be involved in saving and protecting lives in war-torn areas, sometimes under fire as witnessed in Somalia, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Burundi, Angola, and Zaire. In such situations, humanitarian organization employees have been detained, injured, and sometimes killed.

Humanitarian organizations have also been actively involved in the immunization of children against disease, education (including adult literacy), improvement of shelter and hygiene standards, and many other activities for the benefit of the inhabitants in sub-Saharan Africa.

Humanitarian organizations have used all means of transportation available, one of them being airpower. Over the last 36 years or so, airpower has been used in the region to assist in humanitarian relief operations with reasonable success. Between 1989 and 1997, UNICEF Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) and World Food Program (WFP) with some 45 nongovernmental organizations operated in North and South Sudan mainly by air because of the great distances to be covered, inaccessibility of roads because of mines or deterioration, or because bridges had been destroyed in the fighting. Supplies had to be air-dropped where no airstrips existed, or where floods and bad terrain prevented landings, as happened in Kenya in 1961, in Ethiopia in 1984, and in Sudan in 1993. In Somalia, airpower was not only used to move famine relief, medicines, shelter equipment, and personnel during the 1990-1993 civil war but also to protect US and UN troops during operations. Airpower assisted in getting refugees out of Somalia to safety in Kenya. In Rwanda, Burundi, and Eastern Zaire, humanitarian aid and the management of displaced persons could not have been possible without airpower.

Although the efforts of humanitarian relief agencies have been immeasurable, there have been setbacks that airpower planners and operators need to be aware of. Many cases requiring relief aid have ended

unattended to due to various factors. For example, calamities like drought, famine, floods, or even conflicts have not always been responded to by able countries or organizations before the situation has claimed hundreds of lives. Often, the failure was that the affected countries did not raise the alarm for help soon enough. Although many explanations could be made for this anomaly, often the cause is lack of means or skill to detect, analyze, or appreciate the magnitude of the impending calamity.

When the call for help is responded to, relief is often shipped into the country affected in such overwhelming volume or tonnage that another problem is created by insufficiencies in manpower, storage facilities, security, means of transporting relief supplies to the affected people, or means of distributing relief supplies at the distribution centers. The resulting chaotic situation often occurs because of lack of established coordinating authority to manage, distribute, and control the relief supplies.

From this point onward, management by crisis usually takes over with the country being assisted issuing further calls for transport to convey relief supplies to the distribution points, for skilled personnel to manage the operations, and for storage facilities from the point of entry to the distribution centers all without identifying the target groups or describing the environmental conditions that would impact on the relief operations.

Naturally, such confusion leads to very expensive yet totally useless operations. Surface and air transportation are sent to destinations that are neither safe nor secure, carrying food supplies that might or might not be of value to the recipients. Nothing could be more embarrassing to a pilot or to the relief planner than to learn that they have just supplied drought victims with dry maize or beans and that the victims have neither water to drink nor fuel to cook with. Imagine also supplying starving people with food they consider repulsive because of their cultural beliefs and having it thrown back in your face.

I have personally experienced some of these setbacks as a pilot, some as a planner, and yet others as a commander. In the mid-1970s I flew a Caribou aircraft full of dry beans donated by a women's organization to starving Turkana locals at a place called Heret on the Northeastern shores of Lake Turkana. At the time, this was not a staple food for Turkana people. I did not know that then. I carried no water, fuel, or people to demonstrate how the "food" I was carrying was prepared for eating. On landing, my aircraft was surrounded by people who looked hungry. Other than a local chief who demanded that I release the food to the people including him, there was no administrator around to assist me and my crew. We offloaded the bags of beans which were quickly ripped open. The embarrassment I felt when I saw those people trying to chew dry beans has never left me. We were insulted and cursed. And I was held responsible for fooling the starving people by the chief who had turned extremely hostile. I was relieved when the local administrators arrived at the airstrip. I reported the dilemma to my authorities, and when tasked again to fly to Heret, there were a few ladies to teach the locals how to cook beans. It could happen to you, and no one will believe that your job is merely to fly the aircraft and that the supplies are loaded by somebody whom you do not know either.

### **Kenya's Participation in Relief Operations**

Over the past 10 years, the international community, in particular the United States, has come to realize the stability and strategic position of Kenya with regards to humanitarian operations in the region, as well as its role as "peace negotiator" to its war-torn neighbors. Indeed, all humanitarian operations into Southern Sudan, Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi, and Zaire have used the Kenya port of Mombasa, Mombasa International Airport, Nairobi International Airport, and Wajir and Lockichoggio airfields as staging points, operating bases, or controlling centers.

Kenya has handled more than 690 missions related to humanitarian operations in the region and has played host to air forces and civilian aircraft from 32 countries including Argentina, Australia, Austria, Bangladesh, Belgium, Botswana, Canada, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Kuwait, Malaysia, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nigeria, Norway, Russia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United States and Zimbabwe. The aircraft based their operations in Mombasa, Nairobi, Wajir, and Lokichoggio or refueled at either Nairobi or Mombasa International Airports, or simply obtained clearances to overfly the

Kenyan airspace to various destinations in Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi, and Zaire. Besides aircraft parking or handling, Kenya has hosted aircrews, troops, and officials involved in humanitarian operations in the region in its hotels and at Kenyan military bases. Embassy officials and their families evacuated from war-torn neighboring countries have found safety in Kenya. The same is true for the thousands of refugees and displaced persons who fled to Kenya. Had it not been for Kenya's understanding of humanitarian issues, the rescue of Israeli passengers from Entebbe in 1976 would perhaps not have been possible.

Kenya's participation in humanitarian operations stems from its own fair share of suffering from frequent droughts and famines, and from His Excellency Hon. Daniel T. Arap Moi, President and commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Kenya, who in his determination to promote peace in the region, opened to the world the Kenyan airspace, port, and airfields for humanitarian relief operations. In order to avoid chaotic operations as described elsewhere in the text, the president directed the Department of Defense to establish a committee to coordinate and moderate humanitarian relief operations on behalf of the government and to consult directly with any department if necessary to ensure smooth conduct of the humanitarian relief operations. In addition, experienced officers from the Kenyan Air Force are appointed and attached to participating operators to provide advice and guidance on safety, security matters, and local flying regulations, and to offer any assistance within reason.

### **Airpower in Humanitarian Operation**

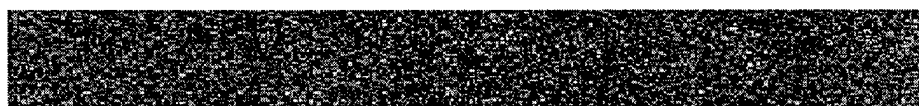
Home-based relief operations planners and aircraft operators do not usually get to meet people who have been affected by drought or famine. They do not get to see the hopelessness in the eyes of children suffering from malnutrition or parents who have lost children to famine. The local humanitarian agencies, national governments, and local nongovernmental organizations have seen it all. It is fitting, therefore, for those sent to assist in humanitarian efforts to understand the complexities of relief operations in order to avoid getting into a mess like I did. "Quickest with the mostest" is not always the surest approach to helping the suffering people.

Airpower has speed, range, and flexibility. Because of these characteristics, the employment of airpower has made appreciable contributions to humanitarian relief operations and peace negotiations, but we are not out of the woods yet. Flood relief, famine relief, and protection missions cannot be said to have been successful until every person in the target group is assisted. To rely on road transport which might or might not reach the destination is not good enough, given the environmental situation in the region. To rely on a fixed-wing aircraft which can only get to the nearest airstrip some kilometers away from the nearest village is not good enough, either. The fact that cases of starvation and malnutrition can still be found in areas being covered by relief agencies is probably an indication that supplies are falling short of some target group, and this means that the objectives of the humanitarian relief organizations are not being met. We will never be sure of this until airpower characteristics are combined in such a manner that large aircraft move large volumes of food from the donor to the country affected, and then medium aircraft airlift their appropriate payloads to identified airstrips where helicopters can then be used to airlift the goods to the villages. Such an operation would require thorough planning and coordination under a centralized command, with participation of all contributing countries including the host country, local elders or administrators who are thoroughly versed with the culture, number, and disposition of the target groups, and of course, skilled and well-prepared crews.

Talking of crews, let me conclude by telling them that:

- Yours is a noble job. Though in a supporting role, plan as if going into combat. This too is combat.
- Carrying famine relief for others does not absolve you from knowing what you are carrying. Ignorance can be embarrassing and can earn you a scolding from a local chief.
- Know your route and your map. There might not be an airstrip, air traffic control, fuel, etc., when you have to turn back in a hurry.

- Know something about the environment, especially the terrain, weather, local flying rules and regulations, frequencies, emergency procedures, and culture and beliefs of the target group you have been tasked to assist.
- Climatic conditions change quickly like everything else in sub-Saharan Africa. Be careful. Relief operations in wet conditions differ from relief operations in dry conditions. Be careful as mission accomplishment lie squarely on your shoulders.
- Keep cool. Do not allow chaos, confusion, or irritants to deter you from your mission.
- If you look smart and act smart, you will make friends with your local counterparts, and you will learn a lot.
- Don't let your eyes or your face betray your frustrations or despair no matter what. The old in the village are wise. They will think you despise them.
- The job is not done until that fellow in the faraway village is chewing your delivery.
- Do not mistake the bewildered face of the local humanitarian relief agent. It is not a sign of appreciation of your good landing. It could instead be that he is thinking "Something is missing here."
- Avoid flying low unless you have to. The drought has killed all the animals and the vultures are celebrating the festive season with low- and medium-height acrobatics.
- Thank God for your well-being and push that extra mile to bring a smile to that crying child. He or she may be the only survivor in a family of 10. Help him or her to continue the family's name. You are now his or her keeper.
- A man or woman of my father's or mother's age is in my custom or culture referred to as father and mother. Older, they get referred as grandfather or grandmother. You need not call them as I do. They might not believe you anyway. But respect them no matter how they look, which probably is why you are there. Be courteous. Their blessings could follow you to your country.



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